

## Processors plan blitz touting Alaska salmon

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What better time to give big bucks to Alaska's biggest seafood guns! Not only can they capitalize on consumers' growing awareness that wild salmon is better for you than feedlot fish, it also means major processing companies can attack America's longtime favorite -- canned tuna, which is under siege caused by mercury scares. In contrast, Alaska salmon shows the lowest mercury levels of any fish. A glance at the \$7.4 million in salmon marketing grants awarded to Alaska's major processors this week shows that much of the money is targeted for promotional blitzes for canned or pouched salmon.

"A major focus of these projects is to move large volumes of salmon with an emphasis on pinks," Gov. Frank Murkowski said Thursday. He added that the grants would quickly move about 250,000 cases of canned pinks out of a 890,000-case backlog. "This is not a giveaway," emphasized Greg O'Claray, state commissioner of labor. "From the get go, industry stepped forward and volunteered. They told the governor, 'If you help us market these products, we will match every public dollar with a dollar from our own pockets,'" he said.

NorQuest, for example, plans to spend nearly \$800,000 to launch a national campaign for smoked salmon in convenient pouches, and another \$181,000 on an Alaska salmon salad sampling program.

Trident Seafoods plans to spiff up its canned salmon labels and spend \$77,500 on a canned salmon tasting promotion at stores. Trident's biggest blitz -- more than \$1 million -- is aimed at getting Costco to promote Alaska salmon burgers.

Ocean Beauty has earmarked more than \$1 million for promotion of its Pillar Rock Pouched salmon and almost that much again for canned pinks. Peter Pan Seafoods has committed its funds (\$362,500) exclusively toward expanding the canned salmon market.

Icicle Seafoods will use its \$975,000 grant to market its Honey Boy, Black Top and Ship Ahoy salmon products.

Back to the tuna angle: StarKist, Bumble Bee and Chicken of the Sea, the three principal U.S. manufacturers, sold about 2.3 billion six-ounce cans of tuna last year. But U.S. retail sales have dropped by about 10 percent in the past decade, to about \$1.1 billion a year, in part because of public concern about the effects of mercury. Last year, shrimp overtook tuna in sales. More than 80 percent of all tuna sold is used at lunch in various salads.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can damage the brains and nervous systems of fetuses and young children. Last year an advisory committee recommended the Food and Drug Administration warn pregnant women and young children to limit tuna in their diet and offer educational material about which fish are high or low in mercury.

According to the Washington Post, the FDA is preparing to advise consumers next spring that some types of tuna may pose greater health risks than others. FDA test results showed that a study of 289 cans found white tuna, or albacore, is three times higher in mercury than light tuna, which are generally from smaller fish. White tuna's mercury levels also were more than twice as high as the canned tuna levels posted on the industry's tuna-facts Web site.

\* **COOL comments.** The Dec. 29 deadline to comment on the proposed rule for the Country of Origin Labeling, or COOL, program has been extended to Feb. 27.

A.J. Yates, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said the extension will not prevent USDA from meeting the law requiring that the COOL program be in place next September. Comments can be sent to [cool@usda.gov](mailto:cool@usda.gov).

\* **Shrinking the fleet.** By 2010, The Chinese government plans to reduce the number of fishing vessels to 192,000 boats from the current 222,000 vessels operating in coastal waters. According to market expert Bill Atkinson, the action is expected to affect 300,000 fishermen, and the government plans to provide assistance in moving these people to aquaculture, fish distribution or fish processing jobs. The program to reduce vessels has already begun, and \$23.6 million has been appropriated to facilitate the shift of fishermen to on-shore jobs. Any fisherman willing to terminate operations will be guaranteed a minimum of 15,000 yuan (\$1,812) from the central government, with additional funds provided by regional governments. The actual compensation will depend on the scale of the operation that is being phased out.

The vessel reduction program is reportedly the first step toward establishing fishing quotas in China's coastal fisheries. Even after the vessel reduction, Chinese coastal fisheries production is expected to remain at its current level of about 14 million tons per year.